DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 392 216 EC 304 647

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TITLE Educating Students with Special Needs from Culturally Diverse Backgrounds.
PUB DATE [95]
NOTE 17p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Differences; Educational Practices; Educational Principles; Elementary Secondary Education; *Multicultural Education; *Special Needs Students; Student Characteristics; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

The literature on methods for educating students with special needs, including disabilities, from culturally diverse backgrounds is reviewed. The paper addresses what cultural diversity is, changing demographics in the United States, special education issues, assessment recommendations, parental involvement, and teacher commitment and training. Discussion of teaching methods looks at the relationship of culture to learning, selection of teaching materials, adaptation of teaching materials, integrated curriculum, cooperative learning, active learning, whole language, and behavior management. (Contains 15 references.) (DB)

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Running head: MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

Educating Students with Special Needs from Culturally Diverse Backgrounds

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Abstract

Meeting the needs of culturally diverse students with special needs will become increasingly important to educators in the next decade. The number of minorities in our school systems will increase dramatically. Skillful assessment practices, cultural sensitivity training, and overcoming personal biases will prove beneficial for teachers when determining the appropriate educational placement for their students. In order for these students to experience success, teachers must contemplate using the most effective learning materials, instructional strategies, curriculum developments, and classroom management techniques. When teachers respect and value the individual differences of each child, the bonding process may begin. That process will ensure the goal of multicultural special needs education which is to provide optimum development to every culturally diverse student while allowing them to experience justice and equality.

Educating Culturally Diverse Students With Special Needs

Defining Cultural Diversity

Prior to the recognition and appreciation of cultural diversity, many ethnic minorities had to abandon many of their cultural characteristics in order to fully participate in the nations social, economic, and political institutions (Banks, 1994). In the 1980's, many educators searched for methods and techniques that would benefit students with cultural differences. These students had educational needs that teachers were compelled to address.

Schools today are rich in diversity of races, cultures, languages, and religions, yet many students feel alienated, rejected, and abandoned (Banks, 1994). According to Janzen (1994) there are two different philosophies of multicultural education: (a) assimilation which attempts to "Americanize" foreigners and (b) cultural pluralism which wants culturally diverse groups to remain intact. In reality, many ethnic cultures fail to blend into the mythical melting pot; therefore, educators must serve as role models by working together to build a nation that venerates diversity.

Changing Demographics

Dramatic demographic changes are occurring in the United States. By the year 2000 one in three Americans will be a member of a culturally diverse group (Ortiz, 1992). According to Gollnick and Chinn (1990) African Americans are the largest minority group, representing approximately 12% of the total population. Asians represent 2% of the population and Hispanic's are the fastest growing minority group. In 1990, over 30% of students in public schools were from minority groups. The largest language minority population is Spanish speaking students (Ortiz & Ramirez, 1988). As this century draws to a close, the number of students with culturally diverse backgrounds will increase notably.

Special Education Issues

The population of special education is also changing. Gollnick and Chinn (1990) have found that 30% of students receiving special education are minorities. Issues effecting the placement of culturally diverse students that may have special needs are: limited English proficiency, test bias, insufficient teacher training, and the reluctance of parent involvement (Baca & Cervantes, 1989).

Assessment Recommendations. Commonly used, standardized, norm references tests have been

inappropriate for assessing the abilities of special needs from diverse cultures. Hoover and Collier (1991) suggest that students of cultural diverse backgrounds needing special services should have the following information in their confidential folders: (a) level of competence in their native and second language, (b) degree of acculturation and cultural identity, (c) special learning needs, (d) present achievement levels, (e) socioeconomic factors, and (f) parental concerns and desires. The assessment of special needs students from diverse cultures has been difficult due to differences in language, culture, and communication style (Ortiz, 1992).

Parental Involvement. Once the student has been assessed as needing special education services, educators must actively try to develop positive and supportive relations between the school and parents. Parents are an important ingredient in the development of the student's individual educational plan. However, not having access to transportation and childcare services have prevented minority parents from attending meetings with teachers at school.

Cultural misunderstandings have been interpreted as parental indifference to their student's education. For example, minority parents think they lack the

skills, training, and information needed to participate in educational decisions which prevent them from being involved in their student's education. Minority parents have a profound respect for authority figures and perceive educators as experts (Baca & Cervantes, 1989).

Fradd and Wilen (1990) recommend a brief home visit with an interpreter to bridge the two cultures. An interpreter will accurately communicate testing results, teacher recommendations, parent rights, responsibilities, and other pertinent documentation. If minority parents are comfortable with every aspect of their child's education, it is likely they will become involved with it.

Teacher Commitment and Training. Teacher attitude is a key factor in the development of a successful multicultural educational environment for students with special needs from culturally diverse backgrounds. Ladson-Billings (1994) believes that the degree of teacher commitment to multicultural education makes a pronounced difference in student performance and achievement. That commitment should begin with an internal self-examination of biases and ethnocentric beliefs that teachers may have unintentionally internalized. Only when teachers realize these subtle

biases in their behavior can they be successful with all students (Gollick & Chinn, 1990).

Concerned, trained, and culturally sensitive teachers have been the catalyst for success in many multicultural classrooms which serve students with special needs and cultural differences. Hoover and Collier (1991) recommend seven important skills that teachers of special needs students from culturally diverse backgrounds should have: (a) cross-cultural sensitization of special education, (b) nonbiased assessment practices, (c) language disorder and difference diagnosis, (e) curriculum adaptation, (f) parent recruitment, and (g) school and community services. Appropriate assessments, teacher dedication and training, and parental involvement are the ingredients that will yield a successful classroom for students with cultural differences and special needs.

Teaching Methods

Culture is the blueprint for determining how individuals think, feel, perceive, and act (Chinn & Plata, 1988). Multicultural education is based on the premise that culture and language form the foundation of a student's education. A multicultural classroom may provide a supportive environment for students with cultural differences and special needs The student's

self-esteem will increase if his or her language, value system, cultural information, and learning strategies are respected and valued. Understanding that everyone is worthwhile is the most important benefit of multicultural education. It is a benefit which warrants preservation and extension.

Teaching strategies must also be compatible with students' culturally influenced behavior, sociocultural background, abilities, and disabilities. Yates and Ortiz (1991) recommends three instructional strategies for students with cultural differences and special needs: (a) the subject must be familiar to students, (b) teachers should use holistic instruction, and (c) teachers must encourage feelings of accomplishment in order to foster intrinsic motivation. Most students with special needs from culturally diverse backgrounds reach optimum development through a multi-modal learning process using kinesthetic and visual styles. They also enjoy an active learning process using modeling and peer collaboration to accomplish tasks.

Selection of teaching materials. Securing nonbiased textbooks and other appropriate teaching materials for students with cultural differences and special needs has been a difficult task. Gollnick and Chinn (1990) suggest that teachers should be aware of

biases within educational materials. The biases that vary from culture to culture are: the concept of color, time, sex roles, distance, space, quantities, and acceptable behavior.

Stereotyping is a bias that means certain groups were assigned certain roles. Selectivity and imbalance are biases that occur when an issue or historical event is portrayed from only one perspective and the contributions of a minority group are subdued. The bias of unreality occurs when the complexities of controversial events are glossed over and contemporary problems are disguised or unrecorded. Fragmentation and isolation are biases that occur when the contributions and experiences of ethnic groups are mentioned in irrelevant sections of a text.

Adaptation of teaching materials. Few commercial materials have been designed for students with cultural differences and special needs, consequently, teachers are forced to adapt their own classroom materials. Teachers may use the following five steps in adapting materials for students with cultural differences and special needs: (a) know the specific language abilities of each student, (b) include appropriate cultural experiences, (c) materials must coincide with student ability, (d) materials must be success oriented and

challenging, and (e) plan materials for comfortable transitions into new subjects.

Integrated curriculum. Integrating curriculum is an effective teaching strategy for students with cultural differences and special needs. Research shows they enjoy learning specific skills when they are built around familiar topics. Students also enjoy writing in their native language and then translating it for classmates. Teachers may incorporate the following five items when planning curriculum for their students with cultural differences and special needs: (a) become familiar with cultural considerations, (b) know students' special learning needs and styles, (c) develop an instructional plan tailored for each student's exceptionality, and (d) individualize at least one lesson each day that acknowledges their individual culture and language.

Cooperative learning. An environment that cultivates cooperation allows the student with special needs from a culturally diverse background to make significant academic strides and develop interpersonal relationships (Fradd & Weismantel, 1989). Cooperation removes the cultural and linguistic barriers between peers. In order to create a cooperative learning environment, students must initiate an atmosphere of

positive interdependence while maintaining a learning independence. For example, a cooperative learning group may be responsible for delivering information about endangered species to the entire class. However, each member of the group must write a paragraph on the endangered specie of his or her choice.

Cooperative learning is a teaching strategy that helps students to improve academically, increase their self-esteem, develop respect for others, and nurture the exchange of ideas and cultures. Through group discussion, students have the opportunity to practice collaborative, communicative, leadership, and decision-making skills.

Active learning. Another effective teaching strategy for students with cultural differences and special needs is active learning. Students engaged in active learning are encouraged to set their own goals, therefore, assignments become relevant. Teachers and students must work together to achieve students' educational goals. Cummins (1989) believes that cultural stories, dialog journals, and shared experiences are excellent active learning activities.

Active learning integrates language skills into all content subjects to give meaning to oral and written communication. Learning is facilitated by the

teacher to promote higher level cognitive skills and intrinsic motivation. Students are encouraged to use their personal learning style while engaged in a project.

Whole language. The whole language approach works well with students of diverse cultures who have special needs because it is synonymous with the active learning process. These students need to develop a sufficient background in language before they are able to understand and apply language rules. Whole language actively supports the acquisition of language elements such as: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Fradd and Bermudez (1991) believe the process of language acquisition is more important than the product. Hands-on activities may be used as a vehicle for comprehending new concepts. Group collaboration is often used to prepare class projects which may be presented by the student in their personal learning style. Using multisensory approaches, providing multicultural materials, applying cross-cultural techniques, and personalizing the instructional environment should yield the best results for the student with special needs from a different culture (Ortiz, 1992).

Behavior management. In many instances, students with cultural differences and special needs arrive in our schools from very different social environments. The school's social culture may be unfamiliar to the student, creating a stressful and confusing situation. Socially acceptable behaviors may be difficult for culturally diverse students to learn and unacceptable social behaviors may be difficult to replace. They must learn a set of survival skills such as: dressing appropriately, recognizing dangerous situations, knowing where to go and who to ask for assistance, eating and ordering food, and understanding acceptable environmental behaviors.

Teachers should use pictures that demonstrate clear and concise classroom rules. Teachers also need to role-play and demonstrate expected classroom behaviors. Writing behavioral contracts in a students' native language, restructuring the environment, giving choices, and providing positive reinforcement that is both culturally and personally rewarding may reduce behavioral problems in the classroom. Proximity control, self-monitoring, student accountability, peer mediation, and peer tutoring are good strategies to use for classroom management. To ensure school success while managing behaviors, teachers of students with

cultural differences and special needs must include cultural sensitivity in their management plan.

Conclusion

Teachers of students from culturally diverse backgrounds with special needs must respect and value each student and their different culture. Developing a successful educational environment begins with establishing a bond with each child. Bonding cannot occur until that child knows by our words and actions that we regard him or her as a unique and valued individual. As Brandt (1994) points out, individual appearances, practices, and beliefs may be so different from ours that it leads to distrust, hostility, and hatred. The only viable solution to the appreciation of cultural diversity is education.

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